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ABSTRACT

A group of senior-level communications professionals who were brought together to discuss strategies for working successfully with student newspapers developed the following recommendations: (1) Some basics: appreciate the educational value of the student newspaper; read the student paper. (2) Establishing a relationship: when editors and reporters begin their terms, explain to them how the university works; encourage student journalists to consider the communications office as a source of direction and information; treat student journalists with respect; plan systematic contact with the student newspaper; understand that student reporters covering important university officials and "celebrities" may become star struck; involve editors and reporters in other aspects of the campus community; assist students to become professional journalists. (3) When something newsworthy occurs on campus: involve student journalists from the beginning; put the event in historical context; suggest related issues and other sources; give student journalists the same access as is given to other reporters and editors; be willing to provide other sides to the story. The group also posed several questions for the future: how to explain to the public the nature of the relationship between the institution and the student newspaper; and how to deal with emerging online issues. The list of participants and contact information is appended. (CH)

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WORKING WITH THE STUDENT PRESS

February 1998 A CASE Issues Paper for Advancement Professionals No. 27

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WORKING WITH THE STUDENT PRESS

February 1998 **A CASE Issues Paper for Advancement Professionals** **No. 27**

Introduction

Covering the Basics

1. Appreciate the educational value of the student newspaper
2. Read the student paper.

Establishing and Maintaining A Relationship

1. When editors and beat reporters begin their terms, sit down with them and explain how the university works.
2. Encourage student journalists to see your office as a source of direction as well as a source of information.
3. Treat student journalists with the same level of respect with which you would treat any other journalist.
4. Work out a plan to systemize contact with the student newspaper.
5. Be sensitive to the fact that student reporters who cover important university officials and other campus "celebrities" can become somewhat starstruck.
6. Involve editors and reporters in other aspects of the campus community.
7. Assist students in their efforts to become professional journalists.

When Something Newsworthy Occurs On Campus

1. Involve student journalists from the beginning
2. Take a little extra time to put the event in its historical context for student journalists. Suggest related issues and other sources to contact.
3. Give student journalists the same access you give other reporters and editors.
4. Be willing to provide other sides to the story.

Issues For The Future

1. How do you explain to the public the nature of the relationship between your institution and your student newspaper?
2. How do you deal with emerging online issues?

Contributors

More than 35 years ago Herman Wells, outgoing president of Indiana University, told his colleagues at the

National Association of State Universities spring meeting: "It is the ambition of each student editor to reform the university, so thank God that their terms are short and that when the next one comes he will have a different program."

Dr. Wells succinctly and humorously characterized two of the major factors that will probably always cause problems in the relationships between campus administrators and student journalists. Each editor really does think that he or she can use that position to effect massive change on campus. But editors' terms are so short that they scarcely have time to learn how the university is structured--let alone make strides toward changing anything--before graduating and heading off to journalism grad school or an internship at the *Wichita Eagle*.

Yet while experience shows that individual editors do not stay on campus long, history proves that the student newspaper itself is here to stay. From the first student newspaper published at Dartmouth College on August 7, 1799, to the "underground rag" that sprang up at some unsuspecting institution last week, student newspapers are important barometers of the campus climate. They provide the people who read them--and people do read them--with a daily or weekly snapshot of life at your institution. So, it is important to ensure that your administration has a strong relationship with the staff of your student newspaper.

No two campuses are alike, and student newspapers are as different as the institutions at which they are published. Student newspapers range from independent dailies with autonomous oversight boards, healthy advertising revenues, and no faculty or administrative input to weeklies closely controlled by faculty advisers from the journalism department--with all situations in between. However, no matter the formal ties between your institution and your student newspaper, both will be served if you can personally establish a mutually respectful relationship with the student journalists on campus.

CASE brought together a group of senior-level communications professionals to discuss strategies for working successfully with student newspapers. The group came up with the following recommendations to help other institutional advancement officers deal with this small but mighty constituency.

COVERING THE BASICS

1. Appreciate the educational value of the student newspaper. To put it dramatically, student journalists lead double lives. They run from history lectures to meetings with administrators over student protests. They squeeze in homework between deadlines and will be the first to admit that they are learning much more from their experiences in the newsroom than those in the classroom. They believe that they are very wise and know the appropriate way to handle every situation. They are not big on taking advice from administrators. That is, until they don't know what to do--and then they come running.

Therefore, in a sense, you have to maintain a double relationship with them. The student newspaper may be a hard-hitting publication, but it is also a laboratory. Undergrads who are serious about pursuing careers in journalism go to the newspaper to learn the tricks of the trade. Just as chemistry majors may inadvertently create horrible concoctions on their roads to mastery of theories and techniques, student journalists' paths can be littered with misquotes, misleading headlines, and missed opportunities. As a representative of your institution, you can help these future Bob Woodwards and Linda Ellerbees while you help yourself if you function as a source of both information and guidance.

2. Read the student paper. Read every article. Read every editorial. Like it or not, the student newspaper plays an important role in determining what people are talking about on campus and how others off-campus view your institution. Don't get caught off guard by missing even one day. When you come across a really good article, take it a step further and send a brief e-mail message to the reporter who wrote the story. That way, when the same student makes a mistake a couple weeks down the road, it will be easier on everyone when you have to call and urge more careful reporting, the need to keep quotes in context, or whatever it takes to clear things up.

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A RELATIONSHIP

1. When editors and beat reporters begin their terms, sit down with them and explain how the university works. Most students have no clue how the college or university where they live and study for four (or five or more) years *really* works. You will save time and prevent errors if you take an hour or so to brief incoming editors and students who will be reporting closely on the university's activities on how your institution functions. Even an immensely complex institution like a college or university can make sense when everything is explained properly. No information is too basic. Prepare an organizational chart including the members of the president's cabinet and their senior staffs, and give it to new editors and reporters every time there is a change of administration. Explain education issues that are affecting your campus and how your institution fits into national trends. Provide as much context as possible ahead of time.

2. Encourage student journalists to see your office as a source of direction as well as a source of information. You know that student journalists will come to you for help when a problem arises. It's far better if they look to you for the type of information that can prevent problems from happening in the first place. Let them know that your door is always open, you are to be trusted, and you will not try to block them from publishing anything negative about your institution--yet you'll help them avoid making embarrassing mistakes. In a sense, you are making the student journalists more responsible by keeping them well informed. Do your best to use this relationship to encourage fair and balanced coverage of campus events and issues.

3. Treat student journalists with the same level of respect with which you would treat any other journalist. Student journalists take their work at the newspaper on your campus very seriously. The work they are doing is important to them, and to readers throughout your campus community. Although they may lack specialized training or years of experience, student journalists are still journalists. If you exclude student journalists--or give them reason to feel excluded in any way--they will assume that you have something to hide. In addition, open discussion is the best way to prevent accidental or intentional printing of misinformation.

Give students the same access to your trustees and CEO, private meetings, and privileged documents, and other confidential information that you would give to other reporters. Arrange for meetings between student journalists and your CEO. Provide student newspaper editors and reporters with their fair share of passes to the press box at the stadium. (See #3 under "When Something Newsworthy Occurs on Campus.")

4. Work out a plan to systemize contact with the student newspaper. It's a tough balance to strike: You want to remain a resource for students without inadvertently spending all your time working with them.

Chances are, if you are the main contact within the administration and you are viewed as helpful to the student press, every member of the newspaper staff will call you every time a question or situation arises. Unless there is an emergency, try to limit the number of students who should be calling you on a regular basis to editors and selected reporters. At the same time, give one or two members of the staff your home phone number and beeper number so that someone can always get in touch with you. Establish sources on campus for key topics and issues in advance, and remind students that they will get better answers going "straight to the source." If your schedule and the students' schedules permit, meet on a monthly basis with the student journalists with whom you work regularly to touch base, address any concerns, and plan for issues that seem to be emerging.

5. Be sensitive to the fact that student reporters who cover important university officials and other campus "celebrities" can become somewhat starstruck. Although they are not wont to admit it, student reporters are often excited about the fact that they are meeting with the president of your institution or your star quarterback or the graduate who is now a member of Congress. Do what you can to set the student at ease. Introduce him or her to the "celeb" and, without being obtrusive, stick around or make yourself accessible to answer any questions that come up.

6. Involve editors and reporters in other aspects of the campus community. Ask talented writers to contribute to other campus publications. Ask editors you trust to sit on administrative committees on campus. This will give your student journalists a sense of ownership and belonging. In addition to allowing you to get less-expensive freelance writers for your publications, it guarantees that they will think more responsibly when covering the university for the student paper. Also, if you have done a good job of briefing your editors about the university and how it works, they will come to committee meetings with a firm grasp of the issues. Keep in mind, though, that this can be dicey in the potential blurring of the natural division between journalists and the institutions they cover. Evaluate the possibility on a case-by-case basis.

7. Assist students in their efforts to become professional journalists. Offer to write letters of recommendation when student are applying for jobs and internships. If a top professional is coming to campus, bring her or him to the publications office and introduce the students who are there. Or see if the newspaper staff would like to have the visiting journalist speak to them as a group. Keep lists of alumni working in journalism who would be willing to chat with job seekers.

WHEN SOMETHING NEWSWORTHY OCCURS ON CAMPUS

1. Involve student journalists from the beginning. As soon as you begin holding public strategy sessions or implement any organizational response to the situation, inform the student newspaper. Facilitating this early involvement will increase your chances of receiving fair and balanced coverage. And don't forget that the student newspaper can be an extremely useful tool for reaching the entire campus community. People read the student paper most frequently when something big is happening, so it is a good place to warn about situations or dispel rumors.

2. Take a little extra time to put the event in its historical context for student journalists. Suggest related issues and other sources to contact. Because they are on campus for such a short time, student journalists often have no idea about the incident that led to creation of the speech code at the center of the protest du jour or about the history of sexual assaults at a particular fraternity. Remember that the person

with the most institutional memory on the whole newspaper staff has been around for no more than four years and that the clip files and back issues at the newspaper offices are probably in a state of disarray. There are a lot of "holes" there. If you take it upon yourself to fill them with the relevant information, student journalists will be less likely to print rumors or misinformation.

3. Give student journalists the same access you give other reporters and editors. As in all other situations, student journalists expect and deserve as much information as other journalists. If they feel squeezed out, their coverage will represent it and will reflect negatively on your institution. Call to give editors a heads-up when a press conference or major event occurs on campus. Use the same timetable for providing information you use for other media, and have the same spokespeople work with student newspapers who deal with the commercial press. If they "scoop" everyone else on a big story, let them print it first.

4. Be willing to provide other sides to the story. Even if a situation or issue is controversial or portrays your institution in a less-than-positive light, help student journalists find sources on the opposite side of the issue. They will most certainly include this perspective in their article, so you may as well point them in the direction of individuals whom you know are reliable and will tell the truth.

ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

1. How do you explain to the public the nature of the relationship between your institution and your student newspaper? In an age in which lawsuits are proliferating and mainstream press is becoming indistinguishable from the tabloids, chances are better than ever before that your student newspaper will print something that makes someone unhappy. Especially if the student editors on your campus are prone to printing controversial stories and editorials, it would serve you well to have something prepared explaining the nature of the relationship between your institution and the newspaper. That way, when the paper prints a story that is offensive or potentially libelous, you will be prepared to face the onslaught of questions from the media, students, parents, and others. Never fear, the students are eager to assert their independence.

2. How do you deal with emerging online issues? Always ahead of the pack on technology- related issues, students were quick to put their newspapers online. Now these publications are available to anyone in the world with a computer and Internet access. Suddenly, the minor errors and slight mixups that were ignorable offenses when your audience was limited to the campus community take on more importance. Therefore you may want to step up efforts to encourage responsible journalistic practices.

The question of the formal relationship between the student newspaper and your institution again comes into play when something controversial appears on the Internet. The wider readership serves only to compound this already difficult issue. Address it by placing a disclaimer on the newspaper or institutional Web site explaining that the paper is independent, a product of the journalism department, or whatever the case. This will also help you maintain a uniform image for your institution on the Internet.

Written and compiled by CASE Senior Government Relations Program Coordinator Melissa Peerless. If you have ideas for future issues papers, please contact Sarah Hardesty Bray at (202) 328-5983.

The individuals listed below represent a broad range of types and sizes of institution. Each contributed to this paper and can share his or her experience on working with student newspapers. This information is not intended to be legal advice for your specific institution. You should always consult your institution's own legal experts.

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